

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY INSTITUTES IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

English occupies a place of prestige in our country, even after more than six decades since the British left India. No indigenous language however has come up to replace English, either as a medium of communication or as an official language. With the Independence, in spite of many a movement against the teaching of English in India under the influence of nationalistic feeling and emotional hostility, English began to reassert its position; but, surprisingly, the number of people who can speak and write English, intelligibly and correctly, is very low. The way English is taught in our educational institutes today is to a great extent responsible for this sorry state of affairs. Our technical know-how has been acknowledged by the whole world, but still our young technical graduates stay unemployed even after scoring fairly well in their degrees. The sole reason is their lacking in communication skills which are considered as the 'survival skills' or 'life-skills' in the competitive scenario of the twenty-first century. Though, the aim of the Engineering English Course offered at various engineering and technology institutes is to enable the students to learn certain macro- and micro-skills in the English language and use them effectively as students while following other courses and later as engineers/technologists at the work place; yet, most of them who have undergone the course are not proficient enough to communicate effectively in the language. This paper is an attempt to trace the problems faced by both the teacher and the student in the English teaching and learning process at the undergraduate level in the engineering and technology institutes. The paper aims at presenting the contemporary situations in India with regard to English and suggesting remedies where these are called for.

KEYWORDS: English Language Teaching (ELT), English as Second Language (ESL), Engineering English, English Communication Skills, Industry-Ready

INTRODUCTION

Background

From the despised instrument of oppression to the reluctantly adopted lingua franca to the status symbol of the upper classes to its position today as a second language, English has come a long way. Before Independence, Lord Macaulay, in his famous "Minutes", recommended the use of English for educating the Indian masses. He felt that English language was the only suitable medium to transfer technical knowledge and scientific bent of mind to Indians. His aim was to groom a small section of Indians who could later use English as a medium of communication and bridge the gap between India and the western world. In spite of his efforts, for various reasons he could not bring up full-fledged English-based educational system for Indians.

In the post-independence era, the need for English was strongly felt in the field of higher education. In this regard, the Kothari Commission referred to the study of English in India- a report of the Study Group appointed by the Ministry of Education, Government of India in 1964. The Study Group had supported the structural approach to the teaching of English, which still continues to be practiced extensively in different parts of India. The Study Group also came up with a detailed syllabus for the study of the English language from class V to XII. With the advent of economic liberalization in 1991, people started changing their perception about English language. Understanding the growing significance of English and its acceptance as a 'world' language, Govt. of India decided to introduce teaching of English right from the elementary stage itself in all government primary schools in India from 2001 onwards. A few words from Kothari Education Commission Report, 2001 are worth quoting, "English being a language of international importance would play a vital role in higher education. No student should be considered as qualified for a degree unless he has acquired a reasonable proficiency in English."

The language policy in India has always been closely linked with the issue of English language education, above and beyond the attention. What began as a post-colonial predicament, continued specifically in the Indian context as an asset to rely on at the level of both intra-national and international communication. Therefore, the language policy in India is supported by the general ideology prevalent in the Indian society towards the importance of English. However, the divide between policy and practice in this context necessitates the current study.

Also, it is worthwhile to note that effective written and oral communication of a general nature in English might be relevant to general learners but people who want to use English language for specific purposes need a specialized kind of learning. This observation made by Mahajiteswar Das gains special significance in the context of vocational and professional courses. Thus, there is a need for a study of the learners' needs, so that the tailored use of English will result in satisfying their immediate needs of learners undertaking the specialized courses of study (2003: 4).

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Engineering and Technology Institutes

With the herald of liberalization and globalization, English language has got a universal status leading on to the ever increasing significance of English language teaching in the educational institutes especially the technical institutes that cater to the huge demand of technically-skilled workforce. While the demand for talented engineers is high in indigenous and overseas-based companies including many multi-national corporations (MNCs), there is a huge skills-shortage in the country. Employers complain about fresh recruits from engineering colleges not being 'industry ready'. In the Indian context, engineering students' success in the on-campus recruitment is mainly based on their demonstration of communication skills. According to Karnik, former president of NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Company), only 25 percent of technical graduates are suitable for employment in the outsourcing industry because of their lack of abilities to speak or write well in English (Karnik, 2007 as cited in P'Rayan 2008:1). Most students are not 'industry ready' because they lack communication skills (Infosys, 2008).

One of the main factors responsible for this disappointing scenario is that English language always holds a second place in line with the technical subjects in the technical institutes. Neither the students nor the administration realize the indispensable position that English communication skills hold in today's globalized market. In fact, it can easily be termed as the 'life skill' in the competitive professional scenario that we are in. Though, the urgent need to improve technical

students' communication skills has always been emphasized by educationists as well as employers. But no substantial and concrete measures have been taken to plug in these gaps.

ELT at Engineering and Technology Institutes in India: Problems and their Remedies

The teaching of English in India has a many-sided problem which needs to be analyzed thoroughly. The problems with their remedies will find place in detail in the following lines of the study:

- Lack of Clear-Cut Aims for English Language Teaching:** The primary aim of teaching English at this stage should be to concentrate on the fundamental skills of the language ability namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most importantly, the teacher must be aware about the needs and wants of the students at the technical institutes. There is a dire need for a greater attention to the functional aspect of language, language which is related to the day-to-day needs of the learners, and not a language which was being used in some bygone age. Today, what the learners of English need most is to learn a language which enables them to cope with the real-life situations around them, where they can communicate with ease and confidence. It is of paramount importance that the teacher should know what his task is and what he is trying to achieve by teaching English. Even if they do have the syllabus in front of them, they have no idea about how to give it the practical form in their classrooms. It is for the teacher to decide how and when to teach a particular teaching item. Their entire focus is to cover the whole course in the given short period without having the slightest idea of its aims and objectives. Our aim of teaching English at the engineering institutes should be to make the students communicatively competent in the English language so that they may be able to use this language proficiently in their professional and social lives. At the same time, the students should also be able to read and understand books, journals and reference materials in English.
- Dearth of Competent and Trained Teachers:** The teachers of English at the engineering institutes are incompetent to realize the need for and significance of English in the new perspective. They fail to revise their aims in the new setting and also to teach English most effectively within a short period of time. We, teachers should realize that a lot of responsibility rests on our shoulders.

T. P. Reddi in his presidential Address said in October 1977,

"We, the teachers of English, are keenly alive to the responsibility that rests on us. We have to see that English is taught at all levels and taught well and its standards are properly maintained". (Sharma, 1999)

Most of the teachers have done their Masters in English literature and have no idea about the English language teaching strategies and methodologies. Moreover, they do not keep themselves abreast with the recent developments in the field of linguistics and theories of learning and teaching, without which they cannot teach their students effectively. The problem of dearth of competent teachers arises due to the lack of teachers who are specialized in the methods of teaching English. Dhamija in her thesis mentions that most of the teachers get in these jobs on the strength of their academic degrees. Only 4% of the teachers have actually attended any orientation programmes or workshops on ELT (Dhamija, 1993). This goes to show the paucity of teacher training programmes leading to the lack of interest in implementing changes in language teaching methodology and

pedagogy. Though, changes are being made in the curriculum but the teachers have a resistive attitude towards these changes. These can only be overcome by conducting short-term as well as long-term orientation programmes, seminars and workshops for the teachers informing and training them about the latest and upcoming trends and methodologies in ELT. Along with this in-service training some pre-service training programmes should also be launched to equip the teachers before-hand.

- **Undefined Curriculum:** What we have right now is an undefined curriculum. Our curriculum should be clear and well-defined. We actually need a learner-centered curriculum reflecting a communicative methodology which facilitates meaningful communication, authentic texts, and communicative tasks with negotiated and not pre-determined outcomes. Learning should be viewed as a self-realization experience in which the learner has considerable say in the decision-making process. A flexible and not a rigid curriculum is the need of the times. Responses should be taken from the students at regular intervals to provide feedback which should be incorporated into the learning process. Self-evaluation and peer-evaluation should be sought instead of teacher-evaluation. The curriculum should, therefore, be based on the socio-cultural aspects of the nature of language.
- **Inappropriate Approach for Teaching-Learning Process:** Language has to be acquired through a natural process of learning, rather through an artificial one and English language is definitely not an exception. Just like we naturally acquire our mother tongue, similarly students should be exposed to real-life situations where they get first-hand experience of the language. Teaching the English language in an artificial manner also leads to the weaker foundation of the subject in students. M.S. Thirumalai rightly observes in an introduction to TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), "The English taught, spoken and written in Third-World countries is often not plain, simple and straightforward. As in the Indian sub-continent, it is derived, more often than not, from the English style spoken and written a century ago, in some instances"(2002). We do need to emphasize on grammatical correctness but not at the expense of fluent use of language. Grammatical errors should be accepted as a natural part of language acquisition at the early stage of learners, while they can be expected to master the language at the later stages of their learning process.
- **Lack of Teaching-Aids:** English language teaching is actually a skills-based subject and not a content-based subject. Thus, it requires a whole environment which is conducive to language teaching. Teachers are required to use a wide range of teaching- aids that enhances the whole teaching-learning process. They make the process lively and interesting and hence, make it effective and better. Though, there is a provision of language laboratories in every engineering and technology institute but only few are equipped with the basic teaching aids like projectors, overhead projectors, record players, computer systems, language softwares, discussion tables, models, maps, flash cards, bulletin board etc. Some have even set-up their language labs only recently though they have been running in the documents since long back.
- **Unmanageable Class-Roll:** The size of the classes everywhere is considerably large and thus, student's participation in the class work is quite impossible. The ratio of students in relation to teachers is not proportional. There are around 60 students in a language classroom in the technical institutes which makes it almost impossible

for the teacher to make the teaching-learning process conducive. This is one of the reasons why individual attention is not possible to the students, which is very much required especially during activities. Though small lab-groups are made for conducting practical sessions but one lab session in a week and that too for just one semester is really insufficient to improve their communication skills.

- **Heterogeneity among the Students:** Another major hurdle observed in the English language classrooms is the heterogeneity which characterizes our learner groups. Our technical students are varied as regards their proficiency. The students coming from private schools or the so-called English-medium schools are better exposed to the language than those students coming from government schools. Students from the rural areas also find themselves out of place in the language classrooms in these technical institutes. Here, they are all grouped together which has an adverse effect on all of them. Since the problem is at the root-level, corrective measures should also begin from the same. Some of the remedial changes could be proper implementation of English as a subject right from nursery class, making English as the medium of instruction in all schools, framing a uniform syllabus in all schools (govt. and private).
- A practical solution to the problem of heterogeneity has been put forth by the CDC Report. It suggests a placement test to be taken by all the students entering the colleges. According to their performance in the placement test they would be graded into three proficiency levels or systems, namely Stream I, Stream II and Stream III. So, based on their proficiency they will put on different language modules, which they have to qualify during their degree course. (CDC Report, 1989)
- **Faulty Evaluation System:** Though most of the universities have now included practical examination (viva-voce) along with the written examination to evaluate the students, it has turned out to be a mere obligation. Neither the teachers nor the students take it on a serious note with most of the students coming for the viva-voce, unprepared. Thanks to the cut-throat competition amongst various private engineering institutes to fetch more admissions that instigates them to give undeserved marks to their students which consequently makes the students laid-back. Thus, written examination is left as the sole criteria to evaluate the students' language competency on a fair basis. So what is actually evaluated is not the communicative competency of the students but how he fares on a fixed pattern of written examination. Instead of these end-semester examinations, students should be evaluated on the basis of their day-to-day performance so that they may be motivated towards improving their communication skills rather than just their writing skills.
- **Less Contact Hours:** With just one course dedicated to English language teaching in one of the semesters during the entire 8-semester engineering degree course offered by most of the technical universities, how can we expect our technical graduates to compete and excel at global platforms? If we really want to address this serious issue of communicatively incompetent technical graduates who are unable to make it to the vast ocean of job opportunities waiting for them after their graduation, we have to provide more contact hours between the language teachers and the students so that they can be well-prepared and groomed for the competitive world outside. Various language modules should be prescribed in different semesters as per the proficiency and needs of the students.

Last Word

In the light of the role the English language plays in the twenty-first century, there is an urgent need to teach English as a life skill. Life skills are the abilities an individual can learn which will help him/her to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life. The urgent need of the hour is to gear up the engineering students for the job market by teaching them job-oriented English language skills. In the age of globalization teachers of English need to undergo a paradigm shift and customize their teaching methodology according to the needs of the learners. Teaching English to these young creative minds could be a real fun if we, the teachers do it the right sporting way. We have to make it fun for our students too—that's the way they learn it better. The teachers should be willing to come down to the level of learners and instill confidence in the latter by playing the role of a facilitator rather than the traditional role of an instructor. They should assess the present and future language needs of learners and teach them how to fish instead of giving them fish to eat. This is possible only with the collaborative endeavors of the curriculum designers, the teachers, the students as well as the administrators. Then alone we can remove these roadblocks and teach students effectively for better results.

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